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Lasting impressions: Indian block-prints and global trade

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Introduction

Above the proficiency in making cotton textiles, India's crowning textile accomplishment was the patterning of this cloth with brilliant fast dyes.¹

Textiles are among India's most successful exports and the enduring popularity of block printed cloth has sustained a centuries-old craft that survives and even thrives in the digital age. Block prints have been integral to the dress codes of the subcontinent as well as serving domestic and ritual functions. (figs. 1-2) They were also embedded in the material culture of diverse nations through centuries of international trade. So what has enabled their longevity and global reach? This paper explores some of the factors that enabled Indian block prints to penetrate global markets across time, focusing on the mercantile activities of Indian entrepreneurs. It looks at 2-3 historical examples and then discusses more recent initiatives to sustain block printing (and other crafts) in India. The latter have been played out against a socio-political backdrop in which craft, notably textiles, has been formative in attempts to forge a unified national identity in the post-colonial era.²



fig.1: Woman from the Patel community, north-east Kachchh, Gujarat, wearing block-printed sadlo, or 'half-sari', made by Khatri dyers and printers.
Photo by the author.2003.

¹ M. Gittinger, *Master Dyers to the World* (Washington DC: The Textile Museum, 1982), 16.

² E. M. Edwards, *Block Printed Textiles of India: Imprints of Culture* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2016).



fig 2: cotton shawl worn by a devotee of Lord Ram, near Chittorgarh, Rajasthan. The name of Ram, in Hindi, printed in repeat, covers the cloth. Photo by the author. 2013.

Trade and entrepreneurship: a brief history

Indo-Egyptian cotton fragments

Definitive evidence of Indian block printing is absent until the late eighth century CE. The earliest surviving examples of the craft are fragments of painted and block printed cottons that were retrieved from various sites in Egypt and along the Red Sea. Produced in western India, these cottons were part of the maritime trade between India and the Arab world during the medieval period.³ The extensive Gujarati littoral had numerous natural harbours, several of which developed into significant entrepôts - for example, Bharuch (formerly Baryagaza), Khambat (formerly Cambay) and Surat. Supported by a hinterland where textiles, minerals and agricultural commodities were produced, these ports were at the heart of sea-going trade across the Indian Ocean and benefited from skilled local mariners who exploited the monsoon winds and a fleet of vessels funded by enterprising merchants. (Simpson 2007). The extent of that trade has been revealed by the discovery of textiles from western India not only in Egypt and at Red Sea sites but also in Southeast Asia. Examples of these trade textiles are to be found in museum collections across the globe, with significant

³ R. Barnes, *Indian Block-Printed Textiles in Egypt, The Newberry Collection in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Vols. I and II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

R. Barnes, *Indian Block-Printed Cotton Fragments in the Kelsey Museum, The University of Michigan*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993).

examples held at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Musée Guimet, Paris and the Kelsey Museum, The University of Michigan. (fig 3).



fig 3: Contemporary block print by Sufiyan Khatri, Ajrakhpur village, Kachchh. Resist printed and mordant dyed using natural colours, it is known in the workshop as “Woven Cargoes”, and was adapted from a ceremonial banner produced in Gujarat for the Indonesian market now held at the Victoria and Albert Museum (IS.96-1993). The banner, found in central Sulawesi, has been radiocarbon-dated to 1340 ± and was featured on the jacket of John Guy’s (1998) book, ‘Woven Cargoes’. Photo by the author. 2012.

Spices and chintz: trade with Southeast Asia

The Coromandel coast of southeast India was also an important hub; trade developed via the networks of the eastern Indian Ocean, where Indian textiles became the principal goods traded for spices in mechanisms that prevailed in Southeast Asia, embedding them in the material culture of the region as well as that of East Asia.⁴ The development of this extensive overseas market for Indian goods rested on the activities of India’s merchant castes. Traders, notably Bohra Muslims from Gujarat and Kling businessmen from south India, were active in the intra-Asian spice trade, exchanging textiles for sought-after spices such as pepper, cloves and nutmeg, and other exotic goods such as rhinoceros horn, tortoiseshell and aromatics. Tomé Pires, commercial controller of the Portuguese fleet based in Melaka, 1512-1514, noting the scale of the Gujarati traders’ reach, commented that, ‘There is no place where you do not see Gujarati merchants. Gujarati ships come to these kingdoms every year, one ship straight to each place...’⁵

The lure of spices eventually drew Europeans to the region in the 16th and 17th centuries. Once they had mastered the mechanisms of regional trade, they exchanged gold bullion for textiles in India which were subsequently exchanged for spices in Southeast Asia. It was the spice trade that spurred the formation of the East India Companies which were to evolve into empire-builders, launching the prolonged colonial era. It also introduced Indian painted and

⁴ J. Guy, *Woven Cargoes. Indian Textiles in the East* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

⁵ A. Cortesão, *Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires and The Book of Francisco Rodrigues (1512-15)*, 2 Vols. (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services (Facsimile of 1944 edition), 2007), 45.

printed cotton textiles to European markets in the early 17th century, initially as ballast in the spice ships of the East India Companies although they later became fashionable commodities when the “craze” for chintz took hold.⁶ The popularity of chintz rested on its bright, colourfast designs and the ease of maintenance of cotton – a new fabric for Europe where wool and linen were the usual fare with silk reserved for the wealthy. Detailed instructions were sent from the Company directors in London, including sketches and fabric swatches known as ‘musters’ to their ‘factors’ or agents in India to be reproduced by local artisans. Chintz evolved as a hybrid style of British, Indian and Chinese designs and enjoyed great commercial success, capturing the taste for Chinoiserie that was in vogue in Britain and other parts of Europe in the 18th century.⁷

Home market

Indian block printers were adept at calibrating production to suit the requirements of a highly diverse clientele. Apart from catering for export, they enjoyed the patronage of Mughal emperors and regional rulers, and produced goods for the affluent merchant and land-owning classes, as well as the pastoral and farming communities of rural India. (fig 4) Inevitably European fashions moved on and by the late 18th/early 19th century, the demand for chintz had abated. Cloth painters and block printers (also dyers and weavers) faced difficult times as the fruits of Britain’s Industrial Revolution were imported to India and began to undermine domestic textile production. By the mid-19th century, India itself had started to mechanise production and in cities such as Ahmedabad which became known as ‘the Manchester of the East’, many block printers took jobs in the cotton mills and the (roller) printing factories that sprang up in the city.



fig 4: rumal (turban cloth) worn by Rabaris of Kachchh.
The textile is block printed by local Khatri and apes the
appearance of a tie-dye which would be more expensive to
produce. Photo by the author. 1997.

⁶ B. Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁷ R. Crill, (2008), *Chintz: Indian Textiles for the West* (London: V&A Publishing, 2008), 15.

Saudagiri trade: Gujarat and Siam

But pockets of block printing persisted in Ahmedabad. Between the mid-19th and mid-20th centuries, Bohra merchants whose commercial activities had embedded Indian textiles in both the commerce and culture of Southeast Asia in the early medieval period, played a central role in the *saudagiri* trade which flourished between Gujarat and Siam. Four Bohra dynasties, the Maskati, Vasi, Baghwall and Maalbari families, developed these affordable cotton textiles aimed at the mass market in Siam (now Thailand). Like chintz they were a hybrid; the designs fused Indian and Thai sensibilities and the textiles were worn as unisex sarongs and women's shawls. (fig. 5) Design intelligence was sent by Bohras based in Bangkok to their agents in Gujarat who commissioned printing blocks from engravers at Pethapur, a village that adjoins the state capital of Gandhinagar – where there are surviving *saudagiri* pattern books. (fig 6) The textiles were printed in Ahmedabad by Muslim Chhipas in Jamalpur and Astodia, and about 30 Hindu Bhavsar families in Pethapur. At the height of the trade in the early 20th century, the Maskati family employed 600 workers in their printing workshop in Astodia. The Bohras' familiarity with the Siamese market and access to a skilled workforce in Gujarat was supported crucially by locally-available resources: running water (from the River Sabarmati), cotton from local mills as well as Manchester, and an established export infrastructure through the port of Bombay. These factors allied to changing sartorial codes in Siam that reflected King Chulalongkorn's (a.k.a. Rama V: 1853-1910) modernisation programme made for a lucrative business.⁸ The outbreak of the Second World War, however, disrupted commercial activity in the Indian Ocean and the *saudagiri* trade petered out. Despite this, *saudagiri*-style sarongs produced in Thailand remain a staple garment, especially for older men. (fig 7) Recent attempts to revive *saudagiri* printing in Ahmedabad by Yasin Savaijiwala whose family was involved in the trade have met with little success so far.



fig 5: Saudagiri print produced by Chhipa printers in Ahmedabad for the Maskati family, whose name is written in English and Gujarati script between the 'spires' of the tumpal (border) design. Early 20th century. Collection of Yasin Savaijiwala. Photo by the author, 2012.

⁸ P. Posrithong, (2013), "Indian Trade Textiles as a Thai Legacy," Satish Chandra and Himanshu Prabha Ray, eds., *The Sea, Identity and History. From the Bay of Bengal to the South China Sea* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2013), 329-349.



fig 6: Page from pattern book of saudagiri designs showing the end border known as tumpal. The book was owned by the late Manekbhai Gajjar, a block maker based in Pethapur, Gujarat,, whose forebears had been commissioned by Bohra merchants to produce saudagiri blocks for printers in Ahmedabad and Pethapur itself. Photo by the author. 2000



fig 7: contemporary saudagiri sarong. Screen printed in Thailand. Photo by the author, 2013.

Crafting identity in postcolonial India: block prints and sustainable fashion

Moving on to consider initiatives that have helped to sustain block printing in the 20th and 21st centuries, I have chosen to do this through the lens of entrepreneurship, looking at the Indian fashion label, Péro, established by designer Aneeth Arora in 2008-09. In many respects, Aneeth and her company reflect government initiatives in the craft and education sectors launched following Indian independence in 1947, and the focus her label, helps to contextualise policies introduced in the postcolonial era.

Péro

Aneeth Arora's break-through collection hit the catwalk of New Delhi Fashion Week in Autumn-Winter 2011 and featured a rustic block print known as *ajrakh* that is worn as caste dress by Muslim herders in the desert regions of Kachchh and Thar in western India. (figs 8-9) The fabric had been printed in the workshop of a young artisan, Sufiyan Khatri, from an hereditary community of block printers and dyers in Kachchh district, Gujarat. (fig 10: Sufiyan on his mobile with Péro fabric before him) Aneeth's collaboration with Sufiyan had started while she was still a student studying Textiles at India's flagship design school, the National Institute of Design (NID) at Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Established in 1961, NID was to be part of the modernising agenda of Jawarharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India (1947-63). The institute's ethos was shaped by the famous *India Report* of Charles and Ray Eames (1958), which recommended the establishment of 'an indigenous design legacy that exhibited a judicious application of both modern disciplines and old traditions to meet the challenges of contemporary India.'⁹ Students were required to spend time in the field studying crafts and craft documentation was an integral part of the diploma. When I interviewed her in 2011, Aneeth described her experiences in Kachchh, commenting that, '... We were introduced to these craftspeople and Kachchh was the closest area... we...met block printers from there So all these techniques were introduced to us as students at NID. After NID when I started my own label I already knew how I would incorporate these things in my label. It did help to know them from the institution and then approach them.'¹⁰



fig 8: Ajrakh on the catwalk at Lakmé Fashion Week. Péro A/W collection, 2011. Photo courtesy of Aneeth Arora.

⁹ S. Das, ed., *50 Years of the National Institute of Design, 1961-2011* (Ahmedabad: NID, 2013), 11.

¹⁰ Personal communication: Aneeth Arora, 6.9.11.



*fig 9: ajrakh worn as caste dress by a Muslim
cattle herder in Kachchh.
Photo by the author. 2002*



fig 10: Sufiyan Khatri with Péro fabrics before him.
Photo by the author. 2012

NID was one of a slew of nodal agencies established by the Government of India from the 1950s onwards that included the All India Handicrafts Board (1952), the Central Cottage Industries (1960s), the National Crafts Museum (1956), and individual state-level craft development organisations (1960s onwards). The Government's promotion of craft as a distinctive aspect of Indian culture and national identity reflects in part the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi who used the symbolic power of *khadi* (handspun handwoven fabric) in the campaign for independence and envisioned independent India with a village-based economy which craft production and agriculture were prominent.¹¹ Craft was undoubtedly seen as a source of rural employment but one that would generate revenue through export sales. Thus state organisations such as the Gujarat State Handicrafts and Handlooms Development Corporation (est. 1973), commonly known as "Gurjari", were to play a key role in rural and economic development.

Gurjari broke new ground when the founding Managing Director, Brij Bhasin, sent designers (and NID students) to work with rural artisans with the intention of adapting traditional craft products for urban markets. Sufiyan Khatri's grandfather, Khatri Mohammad Siddik, was one of the first participants in the scheme: his family has never looked back. With a shrinking local market as cheap, synthetic fabrics replaced handmade fabrics in Indian wardrobes, printing bedspreads, table cloths and napkins for Gurjari provided regular work for Mohammad Siddik and his sons.

Now forty years on, Sufiyan Khatri like many of his male affines, has found a distinctive market niche. His collaboration with Aneeth Arora rests on his interest in fashion and Pero's embrace of sustainable production; Sufiyan specialises in block printing with natural colours and where possible, Aneeth sources organic fibres and incorporates 'heritage' fabrics into her

¹¹ S. S. Bean, "Gandhi and Khadi, the Fabric of Indian Independence," Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider, eds., *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 355-376.

collections. (fig 11) An advocate of the 'slow clothes' movement, she is conscious of fashion's impact on craft, and made the following comments in an interview in 2011, 'I realise that it's not just about creating something for one time. You're giving employment to so many people and fashion is a very different field; every six months you've got to come up with something new... The first thing [artisans] ask is "how long will you give us work?" because they depend on it.'¹² Aneeth's approach and successive Péro collections have brought her encomiums; *Vogue India* applauded the label for its 'deep Indian roots, sustainable production and a commitment to craft that translates into wearable femininity and simplicity.'¹³



fig 11: detail of Péro garment labels giving details of production and use of 'heritage' fabrics.
Photo by the author. 2014

Conclusion

Block printing is the result of the fortuitous conjunction of human ingenuity, natural resources and serendipity. It has played a significant role in establishing India's reputation for craft. But alongside the subcontinent's legacy of artisanship, its heritage of entrepreneurship warrants equal regard. For as Brij Bhasin, founding managing director of Gurjari, has written: 'No skill can survive unless it is exercised... the skill must have a customer, a patron.'¹⁴ In India, a combination of mercantile ingenuity, craft skills and adaptability have fostered a textile tradition that has made a lasting impression through centuries of global trade.

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¹² Personal communication: Aneeth Arora, 6.9.11.

¹³ <http://www.vogue.in/content/aneeth-arora>. Website accessed 27.8.13.

¹⁴ B. Bhasin, "Foreword, The Indian Artisan," Anon, *Block prints and Tie-dyes of Rajasthan*, 5 vols. (Japanese publication – no details available in English (ISBN: 4-7534-1368-3 C3072), 1997), 61-64.

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